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DE RUEHMU #0823/01 1821422  
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FM AMEMBASSY MANAGUA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2810  
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE  
RUEHBO/AMEMBASSY BOGOTA IMMEDIATE 1928  
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA IMMEDIATE 0095  
RUEHBU/AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES IMMEDIATE 0068  
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS IMMEDIATE 1285  
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ JUL 0202  
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO IMMEDIATE 5337  
RUEHQD/AMEMBASSY QUITO IMMEDIATE 0465  
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO IMMEDIATE 0218  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE  
RUMIAAA/CDR USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL//J2/J3/J5// IMMEDIATE  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE  
RHBNK/USNS KEARSARGE IMMEDIATE  
RULYEGA/COMPHIBRON EIGHT IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L MANAGUA 000823

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR WHA/CEN NYMAN AND GREENE  
DEPT FOR INR/IAA EMERSON  
DEPT FOR USOAS  
DEPT PLEASE PASS TO AID/LAC  
NSC FOR ALVARADO  
KEARSARGE FOR COMMODORE PONDS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/25/2018  
TAGS: ECPS PHUM PGOV NU  
SUBJECT: VANDALISM AT NICARAGUAN BROADCASTERS: GOVERNMENT  
HARASSMENT OR SIMPLY RANDOM ACTS OF CRIME?

REF: A. 08MANAGUA573  
1B. 07MANAGUA669

Classified By: Ambassador Paul Trivelli, Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Over the past four months at least seven Nicaraguan radio stations have reported incidents of vandalism and sabotage. In making arrests, police suggested that delinquents seeking copper wiring to sell for scrap were to blame. However, the majority of affected broadcasters feature programming critical of the Ortega Administration and station owners have repeatedly asserted that the government (or its agents) is behind the attacks. They note that in most cases equipment essential to signal transmission was targeted, indicating sophisticated attacks beyond what would be expected by simple wire thieves. The destruction or loss of certain targeted high value equipment has caused the various radio stations to go off the air for a time, some as long as 20 days. This recent rash of attacks comes as the President's rhetoric against media has increased, referring to non-government friendly outlets as "traitors" and "murderers." Even if the actions were not government-instigated, they have served to heat up an already charged environment with recent closings of democratic space and have allowed the government to limit freedom of the media and expression. END SUMMARY.

Attacks on Broadcasters: Owners Blame CPCs

12. (C) Over past four months at least seven radio broadcasters have suffered acts of vandalism to critical elements of their broadcast capacity. This vandalism has severely damaged some of the main opposition stations, and caused all of them to be off the air for periods ranging from a few hours to a couple of weeks. Most of the affected outlets are right-of-center broadcasters that feature, to some degree or another, programming critical of the Ortega Administration. We met

with the owners of several of these stations. Some of whom told us they believed the government and its "Citizens' Power Councils" (CPCs) were behind the attacks.

The case of Radio 15 de Septiembre

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¶13. (C) Radio 15 de Septiembre, the station most critical of the Ortega Administration, has been attacked four times since August of last year. The most recent attack took place in late May and caused the radio station to be off the air for 20 days. (NOTE: The August and December 2007 attacks took the station off the air for ten and seven days, respectively.

After an attack in March of this year, the station was up and rebroadcasting on a limited basis after 24 hours. END NOTE) According to the station's owner, the nature of the vandalism indicates that the instigators had sophisticated technical knowledge of radio broadcasting equipment and that the items that were damaged or stolen were designed to keep the station off the air indefinitely as many of the replacement parts are not locally available. This sharply contrasts with the official police position of vandalism or robbery by local delinquents.

¶14. (C) The intruders stole eight kilometers of buried copper cabling, the contents of the tuning box, the coaxial cable that connects the transmitter to the antenna, and the ring of copper wiring that connects all of the buried cabling. Vandals also removed the wiring that ran up the antenna providing electricity to the aircraft warning lights. The security cables that keep the antenna upright were also loosened. In addition, after the robbery had taken place, the guard turned the transmitter back on causing two modules to burn out. (NOTE: The owner suspects that the guard was either involved in the sabotage or was threatened as no locks were broken and the guard never attempted to call for help even though he had a cell phone for just such emergencies. The owner further noted that several neighbors reported that members of the local CPCs were asking questions about the security set-up ) how many guards, what hours they worked, etc. END NOTE)

¶15. (C) As a result of the last attack, Radio 15 de Septiembre was off the air until June 15 while the owners bought new cables and equipment. Through donations from two prominent Managuans and out of his own pocket, the owner was able to replace 36 of the 240 underground copper cables, the coaxial cable, and the contents of the tuning box. The two burnt modules are still out of service.

Back on the Air, but for How Long?

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¶16. (C) As a result of the damage done to the transmitter during the May attack, the station's present operating capacity is only 20 kilowatts. Although the station's current license only permits it to run at ten kilowatts, eight months ago the station applied to increase its broadcast signal to its full pre-attack capacity of 30 kilowatts, giving the station national coverage. Their petition to run at 30 kilowatts has not been granted at this time. Radio 15 de Septiembre's current license, granted under the Bolanos administration, is set to expire on January 30, 2009. The owner is unsure if they will be granted another license when they reapply.

¶17. (C) Two days after Radio 15 de Septiembre went back on the air, inspectors from Nicaragua's telecommunications regulating entity (TELCOR) unexpectedly arrived at the transmitter site to make an inspection. No one at Radio 15 de Septiembre had been notified of the inspection. Per orders from the owner, the new guard did not allow TELCOR access. The owner of Radio 15 de Septiembre then went to the TELCOR offices to for an explanation of the spot inspection, but TELCOR employees would not see him.

18. (C) In March, Radio Pensamiento, which also airs programming criticizing the performance of the Ortega Administration, suffered a similar attack when intruders tore up the cement blocks supporting the broadcast tower, cut the stabilizing cables, and dug up underground copper cabling. The owner estimated that damages exceeded USD 10,000. Echoing the assertion made by Radio 15 de Septiembre, the owner of Radio Pensamiento insisted that the vandals had to possess sophisticated knowledge of radio broadcasting equipment and processes and that the attack was intended to disable the station's broadcasting capability. However, he stopped short of accusing CPCs of involvement.

Radio Corporacion

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19. (C) We also met with the owners of Radio Corporacion who claimed that similar sophisticated technical knowledge was needed in the thefts that occurred at their transmitter site in May. Radio Corporacion was also forced off of the air for over 10 hours, lost several kilometers of cable and had a specific transmission antenna ring broken. The ring, a key component, was not composed of high value copper for the most part. Owners claim the government is probably encouraging the vandalism but also stopped short of blaming the CPCs.

Comment

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10. (C) Since most of the recent attacks on radio transmitters have targeted broadcasters that air programming critical of the performance of the Ortega government, the owners we have spoken with all suspect that the government is attempting to restrict freedom of press and expression.

(NOTE: There appears to be a correlation between the number and severity of acts of vandalism and the station's level of anti-Ortega programming. Radio 15 lost the most, followed by Radio Corporacion. El Pensamiento is less critical and less cable was stolen END NOTE). These targeted attacks are a cause for concern. Not only do such attacks directly undermine freedom of expression, they create an atmosphere of insecurity and raise the specter of self-censorship to protect economic investments. In light of the government's recent de-registering of two opposition political parties and its mounting criticism of pro-democracy NGOs, a healthy vibrant press is more important than ever to draw attention to the government's actions.

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